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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to determine whether first-year special educators use their knowledge of differentiated teaching strategies in their classrooms. It also seeks to understand what conditions within school systems support or hinder attempts by special educators to implement these strategies. Participants in the study included four first-year special educators, one teacher and one tutor who are middle school educators, and one teacher and one tutor who work in elementary schools. The study included personal observations in each participant's classroom and semi-structured interviews. Three questions guided the analysis of interview data: How did the first-year teachers come to know their students individual needs? What specific teaching strategies did they use to provide for different abilities levels? and What kind of support (materials and supervisory feedback) did they receive for these differentiated strategies? Special first-year teachers share with their regular educator counterparts pedagogical concerns, lack of administrative support, and the need for both materials and appropriate planning times. Unique to special educators is the pedagogical demand for differentiated instruction according to the individualized plan provided for each student, which continues to drive the pedagogical strategies of these first-year educators. Thus the university training for differentiation continues to shape their actual classroom instruction. (MAH)

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Study of Differentiated Teaching Methods Used by First-Year Special Educators

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Study of Differentiated Teaching methods Used by First-Year Special Educators

Background of Study

Individual programming is the basic tenet for teaching students with learning and behavior problems. Students may be instructed in small groups, but the special educator plans and prepares for each student individually (Bos & Vaughn, 1994). This is a foundational tenet for university preparation of special educators. Differentiated instruction based on the diagnostic-prescription model of teaching is mandated by Federal law and emphasized throughout university training of special educators.

The purpose of university preparation programs is to enable prospective special educators to provide instruction for the learning needs of students who exhibit learning differences and cognitive deficits. The design of university methods courses includes information pertaining to assessment and the adaptation of materials to individual students' learning styles and/ or learning strengths and weaknesses.

The passage of Public Law (PL) 94-142 in 1974 clearly charted the expectations and process by which these individual learning needs are diagnosed. The law delineates the categories and definitions that enable certain students to receive special services. This law demands that each student, having been diagnosed and made eligible to receive special services, should have an individual plan stating current levels of achievement and particular educational goals for that student. This plan is labeled an Individual Education Plan, or IEP (McLaughlin & Lewis, 1993).

PL 94-142 further mandates that an IEP is taught regardless of the regular curriculum designed by the local school system. In other words, what is written for a student in an IEP must be taught to the student despite that student's grade or status within the school building (Bos & Vaughn, 1994). In this way, the unique learning needs of special students are safeguarded and a specialized plan is implemented to provide these students with an individualized education.

Additionally, PL 94-142 states that each IEP must contain short-term goals and yearly objectives for each student. These goals are to be written congruent with the learning needs of each student. Such goals are to be the yardstick that measures an individual student's yearly

learning growth (Bos & Vaughn, 1994). The overriding plan of each IEP is cognitive progress through customized individual teaching and services. It is this IEP that shapes the content of instruction within the special classroom.

PL 94-145 does not describe the teaching methods and strategies that special educators may use to accomplish IEP goals. These pedagogical choices belong to the preparation and discretion of the special educator. University special education courses provide this information. Supported by research, these courses expose special educators to preferred strategies and curriculum approaches to teaching students with learning and behavior disabilities. Prospective special teachers not only receive exposure to this information and but also have opportunities to practice this knowledge in field situations and during the student teaching experience.

As a university instructor and student-teacher supervisor, my role is to prepare prospective special educators to teach in this individualistic prescriptive manner. As a supervisor of student teachers, I observe student teachers and expand on their training and implementation of strategies designed to facilitate learning for special students.

Given the unique nature of the IEP and the significance of the teacher's implementation of this plan, how does this knowledge translate into the daily working pedagogy of special educators? This question is particularly important to the field of special education because research into the tracking and grouping of special students reveals significant evidence that placement in special classrooms has little positive impact on the learning of special students (Putnam,1993).

Other research indicates that the induction year of regular teachers has a significant effect on the eventual classroom practice of these teachers. However, there is little research concerning the induction-year experiences of special educators and the consequences of this on the eventual practice of special educators (Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992).

Research Questions

This study seeks to describe whether first-year special educators use their knowledge of differentiated teaching strategies in their classrooms. It also seeks to understand what conditions

within school systems support or hinder attempts made by special educators to implement these unique pedagogical strategies.

Method

Site and Participants

The four first-year special educators selected for this study were former student teachers I supervised during their university special education preparation. These teachers were chosen because they had remained within a reasonable driving distance of the university following graduation. As their former university instructor and student teaching supervisor, I was aware that they had received training in both diagnostic prescriptive teaching methods and the designing of IEPs.

Two teacher participants are full time special educators in rural school systems. Two are full time special education tutors in suburban school systems. One teacher and one tutor are middle school educators and one teacher and one tutor work in elementary school settings. All four are certified K-12 for teaching learning disabled and developmentally handicapped students. All four graduated with Bachelor Degrees in special education.

The two full-time teachers work in inclusive settings and must coordinate their schedules with regular classroom teachers. However, these two teachers had self-contained special education classrooms. In these settings, they teach mathematics and language arts to special students.

One tutor provides instruction for students "pulled out" for special attention, as well as for students in regular classrooms. This teacher provides assistance for learning disabled students in the regular classroom. This teacher has to coordinate her teaching with the curriculum requirements of the regular classroom to which her students are assigned.

The other tutor works one-on-one with students who come to her during study hall times for approximately one forty-minute period per day. She also has to coordinate her teaching with the curriculum dictated by her student's regular-classroom teachers.

Data Gathering

Observations in each participant's classroom occurred during the second half of the school year. Observed teaching strategies and interactions were recorded and categorized according to evidence of differentiation.

Semi-structured interviews that used a protocol of general questions (see Appendix A) elicited information concerning the experiences of these first year special educators. Questions included in the interviews also revealed differentiation strategies that these first-year teachers used to provide for the learning needs of individual students. Responses were recorded during the interviews. Data analysis occurred following the interviews and observations.

Data Analysis

Three questions guided the analysis of interview data:

(1) How did the first year teachers come to know the individual needs of their students?

(2) What specific teaching strategies did they use to provide for the different abilities levels in their classrooms?

(3) What kind of support in the form of materials and supervisory feedback for these differentiated strategies did they receive?

Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed separately for recurring themes. For example, lack of materials and planning time were recorded on the actual transcripts. Topics common to all four special educators were identified; these included lack of support from supervisory personnel and scheduling difficulties. These topics then became themes for the case study, and each participant was given the opportunity to verify these themes and experiences, thereby leading to the description and understanding of this case study.

Observation data was type written and then color coded to show the presence of specific differentiation strategies in the form of the following:

(1) Materials provided at different levels,

(2) Materials provided at different levels and different activities,

(3) Materials provided at different levels, different activities, and evidence of learning-style strategies.

The data is described in the next section. This section provides a description of each teacher and her strategies. The following section describes the problems concerning the use of differentiated instruction that these educators encountered during their first year of teaching.

The Four Special Educators

Victoria (Primary DH Teacher, Inclusive and Self-contained Classroom)

Victoria states, "I sort of just stumbled onto the language arts program by watching the kids and figuring out what they needed."

Victoria taught in a rural school system. The building was part of a three-building grouping of primary, middle school, and high school buildings surrounded by freshly plowed fields. Located on the edge of this rural community, the building represented the "bunker" functional look of the 1970s. It was well maintained. The sound of busy children's voices filled the halls. Victoria's classroom was located at the back of the building; it was a large gym-like room that had been partitioned into three smaller rooms. The partitions did not reach the ceiling, so there was a constant buzz of noise in the classroom throughout the day. The other two "rooms" housed another DH teacher and the Title I reading teacher.

Victoria began the year as a reading and special education teacher. Halfway through the year she was hired as a full-time special education teacher. She was responsible for working with fourth, fifth, and sixth-grade students. In the mornings she worked with fourth and fifth-grade students, and in the afternoon "followed" the sixth-grade students to the middle school. There she taught language arts and math to the sixth-grade DH students and provided assistance to the regular educators in an inclusive classroom .

Her choice of pedagogical strategies began with the IEP and were shaped by observation and informal assessments as she worked with the students. Because she provided assistance in inclusive classrooms, she had opportunities to observe these students' learning and behavior in that setting. This information drove her strategies and planning for the students when they were in her classroom. She describes her choice of strategies,

The hardest thing is getting the kids to just learn things and then interact with each other and get involved in cooperative learning. That's why I do the language arts program the way I do. I noticed in the regular classes they just sat there and don't interact or talk or do anything in the regular classroom, I felt they needed to learn to interact and work with regular students.

Within Victoria's classroom, she provided multi-level grouping and multi-level materials and allowed for individual learning styles.

Mary (Middle School Cross-categorical Class, LD and DH students)

Mary describes her approach, "Everything I do is dictated by the IEP. Everything begins and ends with the IEP. That's where my planning and teaching begins and ends."

Mary taught in an historic rural city system. The middle school was set back from the street, surrounded by tall, old, oak trees. These grounds were used regularly for city-wide gatherings and street fairs. The building itself had been beautifully maintained and altered inside to accommodate changing school populations and technology. Mary's classroom was located on the second floor and looked out through tall paned glass windows into a bower of green tree limbs. The room was sparsely decorated and small for the number of students taught there.

Mary taught seventh and eighth-grade special students grouped by learning style/cross categorically. She sometime had both DH and LD students in one class if it was known that their learning needs are similar.

Her strategies were dictated by close adherence to her student's IEPs. She, too, monitored the students' behavior and achievement in regular classrooms, but was primarily responsible for language arts and mathematics instruction.

In her class, students were all working in the same content area (math or language arts), but Mary allowed for input from students as to how they would accomplish their work. Therefore, her level of expectation was different for each student.

Well, I grade differently for each student. I know what they are capable of, and I start there. One student can write one sentence, another student a whole paragraph, so I

encourage the first student to write more than one sentence and the next student to write another paragraph. I work with each student on different personal learning goals.

Betty (Middle School, Tutor, LD, DH, and OHI: Other Health Impaired)

Betty describes her situation "I teach the whole curriculum. All my students are mainstreamed. I work with whatever is necessary."

Betty's assignment was in a rural school district with the same building grouping as Victoria' system. However, these buildings were new. Built just five years previously, they had brightness and a fresh feeling to them. With beautifully maintained grounds, her particular building has the look of a community college campus. Inside, the halls were decorated with multi-cultural displays, and there was the sound of a band practicing. Betty's room was located directly off the main office of the building. A small "tutoring room", it was about eight feet square. Betty had decorated it to look like a "mini-classroom". She had a bulletin board learning station, an erasable board, and materials all organized in stacking trays and bookshelves. Lunch room menus, sports schedules, and students' work adorned the walls. Her desk had a lamp and more stacking trays with students names on each level. Beside the teachers desk was a single student desk.

Using assignment sheets, Betty communicated with the regular classroom teacher about work and assignments for each student. She then worked with each student to simplify the concepts and/or allow the student to work on the material using the student's unique learning style. She encouraged reading and study skills by having students read to her and by coaching study skills.

So I try to simplify the material. We take turns reading or I read for the students. With different students I emphasize different subjects. I use the erasable board, they love to write their spelling word on it and erase it. It provides a tactile learning approach for them.

Joan (Primary School, LD Teacher)

Joan describes her approach in this way, "Each student has to find their own way of learning."

Located in a suburb of a large metropolitan area, Joan's building also had a fresh, newly built look. The building surrounded a courtyard with a fountain and flowering trees. Tulips and daffodils displayed spring color. The halls were decorated with bunnies and tulips. Joan's room was located in half of the teachers lounge and lunchroom in one wing of the building. She shared her room with the teacher for DH students. A partition of bookshelves and brightly colored bed sheets separated her classroom from the teacher's lounge. There was no partition between her room and the DH teacher's room. Each teacher clustered students and materials at opposite ends of the room, near the black boards, in order to cut down on noise and distractions caused by these two groups of students.

Joan worked in the regular classroom, but pulled students out for instruction in language arts and mathematics. In her own classroom, much of her time was spent working with the students on material or content from the regular classroom. Joan had students discuss with her what they were doing in the regular classroom and then had them "talk" their way through the material. In this way, she gathered information as to their learning styles and strategies. Encouraging them to use their own strategies, she also adapted the materials or simplified the material so students could acquire the concept. She believed in cooperative learning and worked with the students in groups according to level and content area.

I ask the student to tell me what they are doing or I tell them to ask a friend to explain it or read the directions. Too many of these kids are into learned helplessness . . . if you show them something, they can do it, but they don't start on their own because they think they can't.

Support for Differentiation Strategies

Materials

"I had to fight for every bit of material in this classroom," stated by each participant.

Each first-year special educator used this exact phrase. They reported that it was understood by administrators and supervisors that materials could be borrowed, created, or reproduced for each special educator. However, each special teacher reported that the other teachers within the building were reluctant to share materials. As a result of these attitudes, Betty stated, I spend too much money on this classroom, but what else do I do. The kids need special stuff.

Planning Time

"What's a planning period?" stated by each participant.

This quote came from all four of the teachers in this study. Even though planning times were allocated in each teacher's daily schedule, all reported that travel time to other buildings or student's scheduling needs conflicted with the proposed planning periods. As a result, all reported that planning for differentiation occurred outside of school and created conflicts with family and social needs. As Victoria said, I take too much of this home with me, but I don't know what else to do. The planning has to be done.

Supervisory Support

"What's a supervisor?" (Victoria)

"I haven't seen a supervisor since I began this job." (Joan)

My supervisor knows nothing about my job or how to teach these students. He came in one day to my seventh graders and tried to do a lesson with my students. It was so far over their heads. He was talking about place values in the millions, and the kids just sat there looking at him. He finally said, Well, what are you doing in this class?' And I said, 'We are trying to learn the names of the days of the week. He just looked at me and walked out of the room. I haven't seen him since then. (Mary)

> I've gotten support from the administration in the building, but I've not seen my supervisor since I interviewed for the job. The staff in the building are nice, but they don't have a clue about what I'm trying to do with the students. The Ed. Psyche. is good. He helps with suggestions but can't do anything about materials. (Betty)

In this state, special education supervisors are responsible for support and feedback concerning lesson plans, materials, and compliance with Federal and State mandates concerning planning times, class size, and availability of materials. They are often in positions to intervene on behalf of special educators if mandates and guidelines are not implemented within buildings. All of the teachers in this study reported little or no contact with supervisory staff. As a result of this lack of contact, these teachers reported feelings of unease concerning their pedagogical strategies and a sense that their teaching efforts were unnoticed and unappreciated.

Victoria described her feelings in this way, "I don't know if what I'm doing is right or good. It seems right, but there is no one here to tell me for sure."

Mary feels marginalized by her teaching role within the building. She described her perceptions in this way, "I feel like no one knows what I'm doing here and no one cares. The other teachers have each other, other fourth grade teachers, but I don't have anyone."

Joan echoes Mary's perceptions and describes herself in a similar fashion, "I don't think anyone really cares about me or these kids. As l long as I keep them busy and out of everybody's way, that's all anyone cares about."

Discussion

Each special educator made serious efforts to differentiate instruction according to the individualized plan provided for each student, in that process, developed a working definition of differentiation using information and strategies gained from university training and student teaching. For Victoria, differentiation meant multi-level activities, multi-level materials, and allowance for learning styles. For Mary, differentiation meant the same activities, but varying performance expectations and the allowance for student input into the outcome of the activity.

Both Joan and Betty allowed students to use their own learning styles, but adapted materials from the regular classroom in order for students to learn more efficiently.

Each teacher encountered difficulties in each situation concerning their needs for materials and planning time. They felt the lack of these two important components to teaching impacted their ability to provide differentiated instruction. The lack of materials provided by administration put pressure on each teacher to supplement materials by using personal income. Planning time was relegated to after school and evenings rather than during school hours.

Further the lack of supervisory feedback and support for pedagogical efforts left all four special educators feeling uneasy about their teaching efforts. They all reported the need for someone with similar background or training to affirm the efficacy of their strategies and support their involvement with the students. This lack of supervisory support enhanced feelings of separateness and/or aloneness within the building.

Conclusions

First-year educators experience a variety of problems during this transition time from student to teacher. Special educators are no different from their first-year regular educator counterparts in experiencing a variety of problems. Pedagogical concerns, lack of administrative support, and the need for both materials and appropriate planning times are common concerns that both regular and special first year teachers (Billingsely & Tomchin, 1992).

Unique to special educators' first year experiences is the pedagogical demand for differentiated instruction for special learners. Tabachnick and Zeichner (1981) have suggested that university preparation for regular educators is "washed out" during the student-teaching experience. As a result of this, very little university preparation actually reaches the classroom of the regular educator.

However, for special educators, the unique demand for differentiated instruction suggested by the IEP continues to drive the pedagogical strategies of these first-year educators. Thus the university training for differentiation continues to shape actual classroom instruction by these educators.

Lack of planning time, appropriate materials, and supervisory support and feedback on the part of administrators point to a lack of coordinated support for these novices during their induction year. This lack of support will ultimately effect their continued ability to teach their students in this specific individualized manner.

In conclusion, an induction-year program sensitive to the needs of special educators should be offered to novice special educators. Such a program will allow support for their pedagogical efforts and ultimately affect the progress of special students. Future research needs to address differentiation strategies of special educators during their induction year.

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Appendix A

Semi-structured interview questions.

1-Tell me about your first weeks of school

2-How have things gone since the beginning of school?

3-What has gone well for you?

4-What kinds of things created problems?

5-Tell me about your most successful lesson.

6-What do you consider your least successful lesson?

7-What kinds of materials are you using?

8-Can you give me some examples of how you are providing for different levels or needs in your classroom?

9-What has been the biggest difficulty in providing for different levels or needs?